

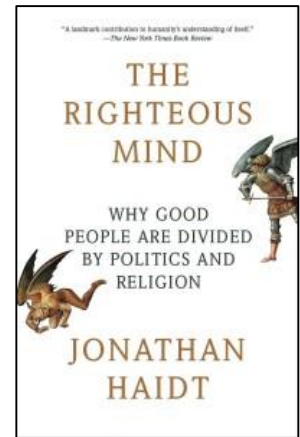
# Haidt, Jonathan, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*

2013. Penguin Books, ISBN-10: 0141039167, ISBN-13: 978-0141039169

*Reviewed by Dr. George Simons at [diversophy.com](http://diversophy.com)*

Do not read this book if you wish to protect traditional paradigms about the nature of culture and its relationship, or lack thereof, to neuroscience, genetics and social bonding. Beware; it will dislodge concepts and biases about political partisanship and religious adherence, the relationship of the individual to collectives and those collectives to each other.

Many of us have been prodded by the reports of research findings that challenge various definitions of culture and the dichotomies of dimensional and dyadic thinking, characteristic of much research and practice. From an article here and a post there, we are alerted to discoveries being made via new technologies that map our mind, our manners, our muscles, that have significance for how we shape and are shaped by culture, but we are often at a loss as to what to do with this information in thinking or in practice.



Recently, doing an overview of the intercultural field, I was able to count 16 different academic disciplines, which purport to have the lowdown on what culture is all about. Looking into them, I discovered that for the most part they live in their own silos, and, at best, connect by mention or disparagement of the aging boilerplate of dimensional thinking in the intercultural field. Now, Jonathan Haidt attempts to bring it all together. He recounts via own learning history, how pieces of the puzzle of morality and culture, science and politics start falling into place so that a jigsaw image of human evolution and behavior starts to become visible. As the Dutch say, the book "kills two (in this case a lot more) flies with one clap." For me, the most influential essay I have read this year, and I am rarely inclined to finish a volume of 500 pages.

Stuck on rationality? What about intuition? Haidt sees reason as the minuscule rider of a hefty elephant treading along the path of life. While we would like to imagine ourselves as holding the reins, most of the time we let our mind rationalize the direction in which the beast is intuitively taking us. Mim Polster, who formed me in Gestalt Therapy, was fond of expressing it this way, "If you need a reason, any one will do." In Haidt's words, "...the worship of reason is itself an illustration of one of the most long-lived delusions in Western history: the rationalist delusion." And further, "The human mind is a story processor, not a logic processor. Everyone loves a good story; every culture bathes its children in stories."

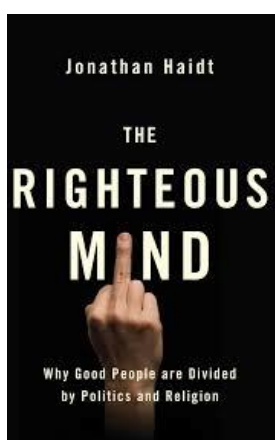
Striving to be "philosopher kings" is no longer even rationally smart, given the evidence emerging from new explorations of our human organism. "...if you want to change someone's mind about a moral or political issue, talk to the elephant first. If you ask people to believe something that violates their intuitions, they will devote their efforts to finding an escape hatch—a reason to doubt your argument or conclusion. They will almost always succeed." Hence, the commonly experienced futility of rational persuasion when it comes to changing convictions. Having spent many years training a program called, "Positive Power and Influence," I saw firsthand how feeble rational persuasion is likely to be and how powerful communication styles involving listening, visioning, and making exchanges to meet each other's needs tend to produce more solid results. Now I know why a bit more clearly.

The book begins and ends with, “Can we all get along?” a sad plea made famous on May 1, 1992, by Rodney King, the exoneration of whose brutal attackers in blue triggered riots and death in the streets of Los Angeles. The subtitle, “Why good people are divided by politics and religion,” targets one practical application of the study to a current dilemma, the increasingly widening and bitter polarization of political positions in the name of God and morality—the USA being the chief case in point—but his analysis provides insights far beyond politics. The choice to say “good people” in the book’s title raises the question about what is good, why we own the differing absolutes we hold, urging reexamination of the disciplines that we have long spoken about as ethics or morality.

Whether on the domestic political scene or the world stage, we are divided by differing senses and sources of righteousness that we then use to pillory, reject, persecute and punish each other as well as bless and exonerate our own kind. The positions are ever more posed in Manichean terms, good vs. evil, “We’re good and you’re evil!” So, can “getting along” be more than dreaming the impossible dream? In Haidt’s words, “Morality binds and blinds. It binds us into ideological teams in sport, religion, politics, etc., that fight each other as though the fate of the world depended on our side winning each battle. It blinds us to the fact that each team is composed of good people who have something important to say.

What are these moralities and where do they come from and where do they take us. Haidt identifies six moral orientations that he calls “foundations”, along with their respective adaptive challenges—what benefits they seek—as well as what triggers them, the emotions they give rise to and the virtues they proclaim. The priority given them and their differing definitions are at the crux of what present themselves as our unassailable narratives, our absolutes.

Most readers and reviewers of this book, particularly US Americans, are likely to focus on its application to the context of political dissension stemming from the embrace of different moralities, or as Haidt would call them, differing moral "foundations." But the importance of his work, it seems to me, lies not in explaining how George Bush could possibly defeat Al Gore, but in how these foundations are both hardwired into the human system, inherited and passed on in neurons and muscles, as well as shaped by the cultural configurations they take from the identity narratives of the groups we build and belong to. We construct our respective worlds according to these and expect them to be absolute and universal. Then we engage in interpersonal and international aggression to make them so.



Haidt’s holistic approach powerfully challenges the tendency on the part of many, perhaps ourselves, to dismiss culture as steadily less relevant when we believe ourselves to have become multicultural, cosmopolitan, global citizens. Many of us are TCK’s whose multiple roots tempt us to declare ourselves as culture free and unrooted. This alienation from self makes us less rather than more culturally competent, a posture that deprives us of valuable identity and behavioral resources. Sure, we would like to imagine ourselves liberated from the fear and hurts of much human experience, personal and familial; we desire to be above ethnic and national strivings as conflicts drone on with ever nastier tools of death and destruction. We know that even the ostrich doesn't bury its head in the sand, so why do we insist, ever so more in cultural discussions, on doing so? What looks like

head in sand is usually the bird feeding itself for its own well-being or turning its eggs for the welfare of its future offspring.

Yes, classical thinking in the intercultural field easily invites labels and stereotypes, but we forget that stereotypes are at least the starting points of inquiry, built into the elephant who would like to ferry us in the direction it's going. I believe that Haidt would suggest that invective about stereotypes is indicative of unconscious commitment to one of the liberal moral foundations and a form of groupishness in its own right. Switching the conversation and the exploration of our plight to the investigation our moral foundations is a first step. This invites us not only to better comprehend ourselves, but opens our minds to the differing configurations of morality that separate us from others, and subsequently to fresh conversations that can reduce deadly intergroup conflict. On the other hand, when we describe human beings culturally as individualist or collective, we risk a kind of essentialism that prevents us from seeing the bipolar core of our existence, the interplay between selfish and groupish that plays out in our choices and behaviors and cannot be wished away. We are, as Haidt describes us, *Homo Duplex*.

The style of this book, as I mentioned earlier, is held together by narrative, accumulating insights as they build upon and conflict with each other in the author's experience. The invite us to examine our moral tastes in terms of what we find delicious or disgusting. Your preference for either of the book jackets that I've inserted in this review maybe a litmus test, an indicator that points to one of the moral foundations within you.

	Care/ harm	Fairness/ cheating	Loyalty/ betrayal	Authority/ subversion	Sanctity/ degradation
<b>Adaptive challenge</b>	Protect and care for children	Reap benefits of two-way partnerships	Form cohesive coalitions	Forge beneficial relationships within hierarchies	Avoid contaminants
<b>Original triggers</b>	Suffering, distress, or neediness expressed by one's child	Cheating, cooperation, deception	Threat or challenge to group	Signs of dominance and submission	Waste products, diseased people
<b>Current triggers</b>	Baby seals, cute cartoon characters	Marital fidelity, broken vending machines	Sports teams, nations	Bosses, respected professionals	Taboo ideas (communism, racism)
<b>Characteristic emotions</b>	Compassion	Anger, gratitude, guilt	Group pride, rage at traitors	Respect, fear	Disgust
<b>Relevant virtues</b>	Caring, kindness	Fairness, justice, trustworthiness	Loyalty, patriotism, self-sacrifice	Obedience, deference	Temperance, chastity, piety, cleanliness

[https://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan\\_haidt\\_on\\_the\\_moral\\_mind](https://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan_haidt_on_the_moral_mind)